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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002415

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/W, AF/RA AND CA

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SUBJECT: TRAVEL WARNING EVOKES STRONG POLITICAL REACTION IN NIGERIA

REF: BROWNE-EPSTEIN E-MAILS

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) The August 8 State Department Travel Warning has evoked highly negative reactions in Nigeria. Many in the Nigerian Government (GON) are interpreting the travel warning as a sign of deep U.S. disappointment and dissatisfaction with the Obasanjo Administration and a deliberate and even hostile act. The administration's opponents are pointing to the Travel Warning as a sign that President Obasanjo is no longer in good favor with the United States. Reports on the Travel Warning were carried in ten newspapers over the August 10-11 week-end, and was the lead story on radio and TV; commentary and editorials have continued throughout the week.

2. (C) Nigerian Foreign Minister Sule Lamido and ruling PDP Party Chairman Audu Ogbeh spoke publicly with passion about the Travel Warning, and expressed their disappointment with the United States, a country, they said, Nigeria has considered a close friend and ally. A Special Assistant in the Office approached the Ambassador on August 14, asking "why does America hate Nigeria so much," and pointed out the damaging effect that the Travel Warning would have on Nigeria's fledgling efforts to attract foreign investment. (Comment: the August 14 "New Nigerian" newspaper claimed that the Australian Government recalled two trade missions that were already in Nigeria, claiming that the country was not safe. End comment.) The sponsors of an upcoming arts festival called the Ambassador to request a letter to the invited American participants to assure them that it was still possible to visit Nigeria for the event, and that their lives would not be in danger. (COMMENT: Prince Pat Abii, National Coordinator for the Obasanjo/Atiku Peoples Democratic Project, one of the informal groups established to promote Obasanjo's reelection, confided to PolCouns that FM Lamido had privately told her that the Travel Warning was factual and that he had no personal qualms with it. However, given the political storm it has caused, Lamido felt compelled to make a public comment in an attempt to pre-empt critics of the administration. END COMMENT.)

3. (C) Timing more than content of the Travel Warning was what seemed to rankle GON officials most. The Travel Warning followed a string of bad press on Nigeria in recent weeks, including a stinging CNN report on 4-1-9, a "Money magazine" article on financial fraud, and internet-posted comments from a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) meeting on Nigeria that painted a gloomy picture of Nigeria's upcoming 2003 elections and prejudged their credibility. The August 13 release of Nigeria's Human Rights Report, which characterized the GON's human rights record as "poor," contributed to this already defensive environment.

4. (C) Political opponents of Obasanjo have applauded and welcomed the Travel Warning, saying that it confirms how discredited the Obasanjo Administrations really is. This comes at a time when the National Assembly, angry at the President for holding the line on government spending, has called on Obasanjo to resign and passed a motion for his impeachment (septel). Senate President Anyim, once an Obasanjo ally, cited the warning as a reason for the National Assembly to hold a session to debate the administration's performance on internal security. The President's Special Assistant also claimed that the Warning has also played into the hands of some of Nigeria's most corrupt legislators who will use it to leverage concessions from the President not to oppose their bids for re-election.

COMMENT

15. (C) Drawing on the Department's press guidance, the Embassy has issued a press statement explaining the purpose of the Travel Warning and debunking charges that the warning was an effort to harm Nigeria. The statement was welcomed by the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who has requested that we post it on the Internet. The Ambassador also plans to hold an interview with three of Nigeria's leading dailies on Monday, August 19, in an effort to clear the air.

16. (C) GON anger over the August 8 Travel Warning eventually will pass, although it has generated suspicions, within the administration and among its critics, that the U.S. is distancing itself from the embattled Obasanjo government. The uproar over the Travel Warning demonstrates and highlights the enormous sensitivities inherent in Nigeria's current political environment. In the local context, our Travel Warning became a political statement, not an advisory to American citizens. The sensitivity will only increase as elections draw nearer.

17. (C) The Embassy first learned about the release of the Travel Warning from the August 10-11 reports in the Nigerian press. While most of the content of the Warning is not in dispute, the Embassy could have lessened the negative impact of its release through advance consultation and an opportunity to brief senior GON officials ahead of its release. Moreover, the timing of the Warning's release could no have been worse, given the domestic political situation in Nigeria. As it stands, the unanticipated release of this Warning supports the growing belief in the Obasanjo government that the USG is complicit in an effort to undermine the GON's credibility on the approach to the 2003 elections.
JETER